

Guidelines for Oral Presentations

- **Know your audience**

The content and level of your presentation **must** be appropriate for the background of your audience: don't patronise them, but equally don't deliberately aim over their heads to show how much more you know than they do!

- **Focus on main points**

Don't overwhelm your audience with masses of detail: there is a limit to the information that people can assimilate "on the fly" in a presentation. If you feel the audience really needs the details, provide a written information pack.

- **Have a clear structure**

All presentations should have a three-part structure: introduction; body of talk; conclusion. ("Tell them what you're going to tell them; then tell them; then tell them what you've told them!") This helps the audience to *focus on the main points*.

- **Use visual aids**

People assimilate information visually more easily than aurally. Pictures and graphics hold audience attention and are easier to grasp than descriptions and tables of statistics: even written material has the advantage that it stays (or should stay) visible long enough for the audience to go back and pick up on any missed points. Preferably, use previously prepared OHP transparencies or slides; if this is not possible, write on board or flipchart. Visual material should *have a clear structure* (on transparencies, use bullet points and nested lists) and *focus on the main points*. **It must be legible** — check that you can read it from the back of the room in which you will give your presentation, **display it for long enough** for the audience to assimilate it, and position yourself to avoid blocking the audience's view.

- **Maintain eye contact with the audience**

Don't talk to your notes or to the projector screen. **This is hard but important:** facing the audience automatically makes you easier to hear and helps develop a better rapport between you and them. *Using visual aids* makes this easier: if the *main points* are written on an OHP or slide you can use them as cues and reduce your dependence on written notes.

- **Speak naturally (but audibly)**

People reading from notes tend to use a rather monotonous tone which does not hold the audience's attention. Even if you do read, try to maintain a natural conversational rhythm and *emphasise the main points* by tone of voice and body language as well as by the *structure* of your presentation. Get a friend to check that you can be heard from the back of the room: the best presentation is wasted if no-one can hear it!

- **Hold a dress rehearsal**

Practising a talk, preferably in the room in which you will give it (or one of similar size) is highly recommended: with the help of a few friends you can check that your visual aids are legible, you yourself are audible, you know how to work the fixtures and fittings and your talk lasts for the appropriate time. Timing in particular is hard to judge without a practice session. Practising should also make you less nervous and reduce your dependence on written notes.